

Gender Studies: an academic insight

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Whilst this supplementary edition of the GJSS has focussed in large part on the contributions that post-graduate students are making to events and debates taking place in North East institutions and to the field of Gender Studies more generally, this culminating snapshot explores the on-going work of six academic researchers from across the region. The snapshot is compiled of selected extracts from these researchers' responses to an informal questionnaire. The questions given were designed to elicit discussion about the significance of researching 'gendered subjects' in the contemporary moment, and these six academics provide a valuable insight into current research on women, feminism, men and masculinities.

Reflecting on contemporary research in Gender Studies, which topics do you deem most important and relevant to current times, and which topics excite you the most?

Professor Griffin: There are enormous amounts of gender research going on which in itself is both exciting and satisfying, especially for someone who started her career when research in this area was limited. Work on human-non-human and human-material interactions continues to interest me, as does research around technologies (in their myriad forms) and gender. I think there is a real need for a new feminist economics that reinvents how we think about 'growth'. There is also need for further research into the brutalisation of everyday culture, and around questions of social interactions/structures as functions of change in the material and technological world.

Dr Carroll: I am currently working on a paper about representations of disability in relation to reproductive sexuality. I think that disability studies, and the medical humanities more broadly, is a very interesting field and set to become a crucial one in the near future. Its relationship with feminism is fascinating and

deserving of special attention. I'm also very interested in transgender studies – this reflects my broader interest in frameworks which question conventional categories of sex and sexuality and which in some ways challenge the foundations of second-wave feminism. It is also a good antidote to the preoccupation with normative femininity which seems to define much work around postfeminism.

Dr Jensen: The gender research which excites me the most is that which takes gender as but one axis of difference and which attends to the intersections between gender and social class, race, able-bodiedness, sexuality, and other forms of privilege and oppression. The power of this intersectional gender research is that it uses gender theory as a tool to dismantle the broader, complex, knotty webs and networks of multiple injustices and oppressions. The challenge is to take this difficult research into the broader world and show how gender, far from being an out-dated, irrelevant or niche issue, constitutes a potent starting point for disrupting and interrupting the coagulations of multiple forms of power.

Dr Lewis: Developments in feminist theory excite and dismay me. I worry that academic feminism is – or is seen to be – too far removed from critiques of the gender order in people's lived realities. If academic feminism isn't useful for activists, commentators, those challenging

gender norms and gendered oppression, then it loses its value. A real strength of the history of feminism is of the dynamic engagements between feminists inside and outside the academy. I fear that recent feminist theory, and especially that which has got lost in postmodernist post-structuralist mazes, has caused a rift between academics and activists, which we should seek to mend.

Dr Scanlon: Recently I've been interested in work that reflects explicitly upon what we do and how we do it when we write criticism from feminist perspectives. This reflection at a meta-level helps me to think about my own work as part of a collective endeavour. I'm particularly engaged by work that addresses the operations of gender in relation to emerging trends, cultural phenomena and new media.

Dr Smith: The changes in feminism over the course of the last 100 years have only relatively recently come to influence performances of masculinity and as such, research into the dynamics of this is still developing. For example, certain strands of postfeminism (such as is personified by the 'ladette') have been seen by some feminists as being masculinity getting its own way with the compliance of women. Conversely, it has increasingly been seen as being an important part of a male politician's public persona to be a 'family man' who can appeal to female voters through his apparent

agreement with the aims of feminism.

In the context of the current financial crisis - in which women are disproportionately disadvantaged - and in light of the challenges faced by postfeminism and anti-feminist sentiments, there appears to be a renewed commitment to feminism both within and outside the academy in recent years. What do you think has caused this resurgence of feminism? Where do you hope this renewed interest in feminism will take us?

Dr Carroll: From my experience of teaching university students over the years I don't think feminism has ever gone away, as I have always found students receptive and enthusiastic (both male and female). The consciousness-raising and activist groups of the second-wave seem to have become defining models for our idea of what activism is, which I think is misleading and perhaps a generational blind-spot. The renewal of forms of activism which rely on collectivity and symbolic gestures in the public sphere is very interesting and can be put in a broader context of new social movements. I don't subscribe to the view that young women are not political or feminist and I think the feminism of many young men is also worth noting and celebrating.

Professor Griffin: I would love a renewed interest in feminism, if it

exists (although I'm not entirely sure of this), to lead to strong interventions in the areas that threaten our existence at present – of which there are many, from the preservation and just distribution of resources to the re-thinking of how we imagine the future. Feminist organising remains fragmented and often hidden or low-key; it would be great to see much stronger public feminist presences again.

Dr Jensen: Although I do sometimes despair at the way gender research and feminism continues to be (mis)represented in mainstream media, I am encouraged by the resurgence of interest from young women and men in feminism, which I saw at its most creative and angry peak in the exhilarating Slutwalks of 2011. The absolute centrality of gender to current anti-cuts movements, which have powerfully documented the gendered impacts of government austerity projects, are similarly encouraging. These events and movements seem to me to constitute something of a light-bulb moment for a lot of sex-positive and/or socialist-minded people who spoke of recognising (in some cases for the first time) the damages and toxicity of gender tyranny and gendered economic injustices. I am also hugely optimistic about the ways that gender researchers, activists and writers have made new opportunities in online discussion environments, forums, blogs, fanzines, journals, digital media spaces and

archives. These are great places to publish research and develop public conversations.

Dr Smith: Following the ‘successes’ of second-wave feminism, the feminist movement rather lost its way and fragmented into special interest factions. By the 1990s, the dream of equality had been realised in some ways but the ‘having it all’ agenda was proving impossible. The Labour government from 1997 onwards raised ‘women’s issues’ as an institutionally relevant issue with a ‘minister for women’ being appointed and various pieces of legislation passed by Labour raising the issue of families and fatherhood too. Therefore gender was already institutionally high profile when the Coalition came along in 2010 and started to dismantle the legislation aimed at encouraging equal parenting, and then at demolishing the public sector which traditionally has a high number of female employees. So, in Britain, issues of gender have resurfaced as political, and international issues of feminism in its wider context - such as the ‘Slutwalks’ – have gained momentum. The rights won by the mothers and grandmothers of today’s young women were taken for granted, but are now being seen as being under threat and the more aware of today’s young women are starting to wake up to this.

Dr Scanlon: I hope this resurgence will result in some good, old-fashioned consciousness-raising. The majority of students I teach tend

not to see the relevance of feminism to them or to today’s world at all. The more commitment and visibility there is, both within and beyond the academy, the more it will hopefully enable them to reflect. I have been invigorated by seeing young people in the North East recently take up the fight and organise events and actions. This gives me hope that gender inequality has moved back up the agenda, where it belongs.

What are your thoughts on the development of research into men and masculinities? How does this feed into your research or your thoughts on wider gender issues?

Professor Griffin: Far too few men are engaged in research on masculinity, particularly critical masculinity. We live in an age of a new conservatism in which very conventional hetero-masculinity remains absolutely dominant. This must be a real concern for feminists.

Dr Carroll: I think the investigation of masculinity is absolutely essential but I find that some of the work badged as ‘masculinity studies’ is quite poor – although the same can be said of some work flying under the feminist flag of course. I think masculinity in all its forms needs to be theorised much more rigorously and the category of ‘men’ interrogated, especially in relation to race and sexuality – but I would see all work on sex, gender and sexuality as belonging to one spectrum.

For me however, queer theory is the more essential reference point.

Dr Lewis: I am rather ambivalent. I worry about research about men and masculinity that doesn't address power and the ways in which men and patriarchy have exerted power at women's cost. Research that simply reflects on the state of masculinity or the experience of men, without setting it in the wider political context is not part of the feminist project, in my view. There does seem to be a trend amongst students to engage with research about masculinity/men in a non-political way, which is a worrying development as it ignores the valuable history of feminist thought.

Why is the interdisciplinary study of gender important or significant?

Dr Carroll: I think it is essential given that the frameworks which we use in gender and sexuality studies are not discipline specific – some of my most important reference points have come from books published within the social sciences field.

Professor Griffin: Gender as an identity category (however contested on both counts) is a category of enquiry (as much as a lived experience or a performance) that is not bound by discipline and in its complexity and articulation requires inter-, multi- and trans-disciplinary engagement. 'Interdisciplinary' and 'collaboration' have become research mantras in our age, and

for very good reasons. Knowledge boundaries shift as knowledge changes and this also goes for knowledge about gender. Hanging on to discipline too tightly always strikes me as a sign of anxiety since it closes down avenues of understanding.

Dr Jensen: The debates around gender 'as a discipline' are complex: on the one hand gender should be present everywhere throughout the academy since it is absolutely fundamental to how our world is shaped, textured and experienced. On the other hand, being the academic who 'does' gender (or even the department that 'does gender') often permits others to defer all gendered questions to you. So should gender researchers be arguing for specific spaces and centres for the study of gender, or for gender research to be everywhere? My instinct is to argue for the latter; to take gender research on the road, to make gendered interruptions, and to be, if necessary, the 'killjoy feminist'. I am fortunate enough to be in a department which does take gender seriously and which does not impose responsibility for that upon female colleagues.

Dr Lewis: Gender doesn't happen within disciplinary boundaries! The disciplines are useful and valuable in terms of their approaches to developing knowledge (for example in conventions about conceptualising problematics, methodologies and developing theoretical

approaches) but can create limits or boundaries to the further development of knowledge. The topic – gender – is more important than the discipline.

Dr Smith: ‘Gender Studies’ is inherently interdisciplinary, with interesting research being carried out in media studies, cultural studies, sociology, literature, linguistics, education, psychology, and so on. It would be virtually impossible to carry out any sort of study of gender without drawing on the work of other disciplines to provide a more rounded argument.

What role do postgraduate researchers play in the field of Gender Studies?

Professor Griffin: It is impressive to see how much organising there is among post-graduate students in relation to research – though this is, of course, also driven by the current neoliberal academic climate with its impossible demands on post-graduate researchers and its accountability culture.

Dr Smith: Post-graduates can offer new and exciting approaches to academic study. Several of the books Dr Claire Nally and I are commissioning for the I.B. Tauris series are by doctoral students whose studies are bringing innovative approaches to gender to bear.

Dr Lewis: They are the future of the endeavour so are vital. Their involvement in not only their own

studies, but also wider activities in the field, like this supplementary issue on the theme ‘Gendered Subjects’, is essential to keep Gender Studies alive.

This special edition of GJSS has a focus on current research within North East institutions – what are your feelings on our highlighting this?

Dr Carroll: I know there is a lot of very interesting work going on in universities in this region but I don’t really have an overview of it – so it’s great that this issue can provide this!

Dr Scanlon: Thanks for doing it is perhaps the first thought! There is a lot going on in terms of gender in the North East and this kind of pooling together should happen more often. It helps to keep us on the map, geographically and conceptually – and it helps to keep us informed about just what is going on across the different institutions.

Dr Smith: There is a lot of research into gender going on across universities in the North East, as there is nationally and internationally. This field is highly interdisciplinary which means that not all researchers will be clearly identified, so your special edition will bring together in one place information about what is going on regionally for the first time.

Please use the following links to view the academic profiles for each of these individuals:

Dr Carroll: http://www.tees.ac.uk/schools/sam/staff_profile_details.cfm?staffprofileid=U0011005

Professor Griffin: <https://www.york.ac.uk/inst/cws/staff/gabrielegriffin.htm>

Dr Jensen: <http://www.ncl.ac.uk/sacs/staff/profile/tracey.jensen>

Dr Lewis: <http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/sd/academic/sass/about/socscience/deptstaff/lewis/>

Dr Scanlon: http://www.northumbria.ac.uk/sd/academic/sass/about/humanities/englishhome/staff/englitstaff/j_scanlon/

Dr Smith: <http://www.sunderland.ac.uk/faculties/es/ourfaculty/staff/culture/angelasmith/>